

Introduction to Occidentalism

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Occidentalism is a new field of study, which tells history of the various Muslim intellectuals who have, historically, challenged the Western way of life.(1)

Occidentalism is a view of the Occident in non-Western literature and a subject that investigates the internal workings of Western civilisation. Occidentalism is a discourse producing stylized images and essentialised representations of the West. Occidentalism has become the focus of renowned and sustained academic interest, spawning ever increasing new literature written both inside and outside the West. (2)

This term gained currency in academic circles in the last decade of 20th century. The use of words 'the East' and 'the West' in Western and Islamic literature is common, therefore the division of the East and the West is not new to literary circles but its use in the form of literary rivals to each other is somewhat new. These words are used in different meanings and for different purposes. There is no East (Orient) and there is no West (Occident) in one sense. These terms are abstractions we readily use, but in the end they mean quite different things to different people under different circumstances. It is the goal of this article to discern just we are- and are not- talking about when referring to the problem of the East and the West. (3)

It is difficult to explain the true signified of the two terms, because these terms are used in different meanings and for different purposes, therefore Graham E. Fuller and Ian O. Lesser write as "What is "the Orient" and what is "the Occident". If defining "the Orient" is difficult, defining "the Occident" is even harder, not for the Muslims but for the Westerners as well. Sometimes to Muslims "the Occident" means the former colonial nations who conquered and dominated most of the Muslim world at some point in history. On the other occasions, "the Occident" actually refers to the United States as the leading Western power and dominant political, cultural, and economic actor in the Muslim world." (4)

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When was this division, i.e. the division of 'the East' and 'the West' as literary rivals to each others introduced and whether it is logical and justified or not, Edward W. Said writes about it as

"From at least the end of eighteenth century until our own day, modern Occidental reactions to Islam have been dominated by a radically simplified type of thinking that may still be called Orientalist. The general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, "different" one called the Orient [or the East], the other, also known as "our" world, called the Occident or the West. Such divisions always come about when one society or culture thinks about another one, different from it; but it is interesting that even when the Orient has uniformly been considered an inferior part of the world, it has always been endowed both with greater size and with a greater potential for power (usually destructive) than the West."(5)

It is a misperception that if the West (the Occident) has studied the East (the Orient) in a bigoted way, then the East will definitely study the West in the same way. So they consider Occidentalism as a contrary to Orientalism. Q. Edward Wang writes in his article "Occidentalism" in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*

"While the discussion of Occidentalism is often in juxtaposition with that of Orientalism, it can also amount to a criticism of the latter. Edward Said's critique of Orientalist writings and studies raised important questions about the Western hegemonic power in shaping the imagery of the "Orient". But like the Orientalists, as Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi charges, Said, in presenting his thesis on the Western discursive hegemony, underestimates and overlooks the intellectual power and contribution of the people in Orient. In his study of the Persianate writings in history and travelogue by Iranians and Indians during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Tavakoli-Targhi notes that prior to the spread of European power, the Asian not only traveled to and wrote about Europe, contributing to Persianate Europology, but they also helped the early European Orientalists to acquire a knowledge of the Orient. In other words, in the exchange between East and the West, the East was not a passive, silent other, as portrayed by the Orientalists (and also, ironically, as endorsed by Edward Said). Rather, argues Tavakoli-Targhi, the persianate writer displayed equivalent intellectual capability to engage in cross-cultural communications with their western counterparts."(6)

To the growing literature -despite being a controversial one- which tries to decipher the current divide between Islam and the West, Occidentalism is a solid addition, which tells the history of the various Muslim groups and intellectuals who have, historically, challenged the Western thought and way of life. (7)

Occidentalism is the scholarly knowledge of Western cultures, religions, languages, thoughts and people. (8)

According to Stein Tonnesson, Research Professor, NIAS Occidentalism is a positive Arab response to Edward Said's critique of Western Orientalism. The man behind the concept is Professor Hassan Hanfi, leader of the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Cairo and a former researcher at the United Nations University in Tokyo. (9)

This Renowned Egyptian author and philosopher Professor Dr Hassan Hanafi writes in his famous book Muqaddimah fi 'ilm al-Istighrāb (Introduction to the science of Occidentalism) as

"انشاء علم ((الاستغراب)) كعلم دقيق بعد أن ظهرت اراءصاته لدى جيلنا ودون أن تتحول إلى علم، وتحويل الحضارة الأوروبية أيضا من دراسة موضوع إلى موضوع دراسة، والكشف عن مسار هذه الحضارة، مصدرا وبينية، بداية و نهاية، نشأة و تطورا، بنية و تكويننا كما فعلت مع غيرها عندما حولتها إلى مواضيع للدراسة فلم تسلم من التحيز والمحاباة. وقد يكون علم ((الاستغراب)) أسعد حظا في الموضوعية و الحياد، معطيا معاني جديدة لهما بعد أن يقضى عليهما كوههم وأسطورة ويكشف عنهما كخداع وتحايل، لقد أن الأوان لجيلنا أن يرى الحضارة الغربية عن بعد دون الالتصاق بها حتى يمكن رؤيتها في شمولها، دون الابتعاد عنها فتختفي عن الانظار أو التوحد بها فيختفي الناظر. (10)

The establishment of science of Occidentalism as a subtle knowledge after leaving its marks on our generation when it was still not converted into a science and also after conversion of European civilisation from study of a subject into a discipline of research and after discovery of the course of this civilisation, its source and environment, its structure and formation from beginning to an end and from emergence to development, as it is done in the case of other science when they are converted into a discipline of research, resultantly they don't remain secure from partiality and favoritism. May be the science of Occidentalism is more fortunate enough from the viewpoint of objectivity and neutrality. It may give both of them (objectivity & neutrality) new meanings annihilating their fabulous and

fictionary characteristics and detaching their impression of fraudulence and maneuvering. Now the time has come for our generation to view the western civilization from distance without having any contact with it so that it may be visualized apprehensively. We will neither remain away from it an extant that it may desperate from our eyes nor we will integrate to an extant that the view may disappear.

Dr Yahya Murād explains Occidentalism as:

"أما الاستغراب في المفهوم اللغوي فقد ورد منه "استغرب في الضحك و أغرب إذا أكثر منه استغرب عليه الضحك كذلك... وفي الحديث: أنه ضحك حتى استغرب أي: بالغ فيه، وقيل: إن الاستغراب هو القهقهة،... و استغرب الدمع: سال والمؤكد حتى الآن أن المفهوم العلمي الذي نرمي إليه هنا بعيد كل البعد من المعنى الأصلي للكلمة، ولكن لا مانع من الاجتهاد في هذا المجال مادامت قواعد علمي الصرف و الاشتقاق تسمح بذلك.

وعلى هذا يمكن القول: إن كلمة "الاستغراب" مأخوذة من كلمة "غرب" و كلمة غرب تعني أصلاً مغرب الشمس، وبناء على هذا يكون الاستغراب هو: علم الغرب ومن هنا يمكن كذلك تحديد كلمة "المستغرب" وهو: الذي تبحر من أهل الشرق في إحدى لغات الغرب و آدابها و حضارتها" (11).

On this base, it is possible to say that Al-Istighrāb (Occidentalism) is derived from the word "Gharb" and the word "Gharb" originally means the place of setting the Sun i.e. the West. On that basis Al-Istighrāb (Occidentalism) is the knowledge of the West and Al-Mustaghrib (Occidentalism) is the scholar from the East who is well versed on any Western language and their culture and civilization.

Occidentalism is an investigation of images of Western cultural identity. It is the discourse among Orientals about the West. In another word we can say that Occidentalism as a field of study is an oriental reaction of Orientalism and the Western mind. Therefore we may define Occidentalism and Occidentalism according to Edward W. Said's definition of Orientalist and Orientalism as

Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Occident and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, philologist or a religious scholar either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Occidentalism, and what he or she does is Occidentalism.

Q. Edward Wang interpret Occidentalism as

“The term Occidentalism refers primarily to the many ways in which non-Western intellectuals, artists, the general public perceive and present the West. Though it seems to be an inversion of Orientalism, it has acquired some unique aspects defying a simple definition. In fact, the practices and discourses of Occidentalism vary a great deal, from time to time and region to region. If we can arbitrarily divide certain parts of the world into West and East, then the people of East, like their counterparts in the West, had approached an understanding and knowledge of the West long before such terms as Occidentalism and Orientalism were coined. However, it was largely due to the seminal influence of Edward Said’s Orientalism that the discussion and use of the term Occidentalism gradually, from the 1990s on, gained currency in academic circles. Also the two discourses not only juxtapose but also overlap with one another, in that the non-Western people do not perceive the West solely on their own cultural terms; rather, given the presence of Western discursive hegemony, they present the West either as a contrast, or an exemplar, reminding one of the principal practices of Orientalism among the Westerners. Different from the Orientalist discourse, which is mostly made by and for the Westerners, however, the Occidentalist discourse is made by non-Westerners for both Westerners and themselves. The relation between Islam and the West now occupies center stage in the post-Cold War debate over the future direction of international affairs. But the issue itself is very old one, with powerful and enduring images flowing from historical experience and perceptions on both sides. The West-and here we are referring largely to Europeans-has been exposed to Islam virtually since its inception, and Muslim societies have been the subject of scholarly and diplomatic study since the Middle Ages. Historically, the West has known, or thought it has known, a great deal about Islam, and certainly much more than the Islamic world has known about the West.” (12)

Occidentalism is also interpreted as the dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit in their well known book “Occidentalism: the West in the eyes of its Enemies”. (13)

Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit trace the origins of these ‘negative’ representations of the West back to the Reformation, the Renaissance and the emergence of natural science, which brought about a separation of church and state in Western Europe that was opposed. Ian Buruma writes in his article “Origin of Occidentalism” as

“Clearly, the idea of the West as a malign force is not some Eastern or Middle Eastern idea, but has deep roots in European soil. Defining it in

historical terms is not a simple matter. Occidentalism was part of the counter-Enlightenment, to be sure, but also of the reaction against industrialization. Some Marxists have been attracted to it, but so, of course, have their enemies on the far right. Occidentalism is a revolt against rationalism (the cold, mechanical West, the machine civilization) and secularism, but also against individualism. European colonialism provoked Occidentalism, and so does global capitalism today. But one can speak of Occidentalism only when the revolt against the West becomes a form of pure destruction, when the West is depicted as less than human, when rebellion means murder. Wherever it occurs, Occidentalism is fed by a sense of humiliation, of defeat.” (14)

This interpretation of Occidentalism is totally different from those which are mentioned above. Why authors of this book are interpreting Occidentalism as? It is obvious that it is the continuity of typical orientalist’s thought. Akeel Bilgrami has expressed his views about Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit’s book “Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies” in his paper “Occidentalism, the very idea: An essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment” presented at the Conference on India at the University of Chicago, November 2005. He says

“The subtitle of Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit’s Occidentalism, elaborates its striking title as: “The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies”. The book’s aim is to provide an account of a certain conception of the West which is named in their title and which they find today in hostile Islamist reactions to the West, a conception which they claim is just as unfair to and dehumanizing of the West as “Orientalism” was said to be of the Orient, in Edward Said’s well-known book bearing that name. The book is slight and haphazard in argument and my interest in it; is not so much intrinsic as it is to use it instrumentally in the dialectic of this paper’s analysis. It furnishes –in its way– some of the fundamental theoretical notions needed to present that analysis. Given their various, somewhat unsystematic, claims in the book, it is a little obscure, and perhaps even a little arbitrary, what they mean by the ‘West’ and therefore what they have in mind by ‘Occidentalism’.” (16)

Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit’s view of ‘the West’ and ‘Occidentalism’ is as under

“Something else is going on, which my co-author, Avishai Margalit, and I call Occidentalism (the title of our new book): a war against a particular idea of the West, which is neither new nor unique to Islamist extremism. The current jihadis see the West as something less than human, to be destroyed, as

though it were a cancer. This idea has historical roots that long precede any form of "U.S. imperialism." Similar hostility, though not always as lethal, has been directed in the past against Britain and France as much as against America. What, then, is the Occidental idea of the West?" (17)

It is obvious that the two authors are trying to relate the scholarly knowledge of the West i.e. Occidentalism with so-called terrorism and war on terror. They are trying to prove that 'the Muslim Terrorists' (Jihadis) are occidentalists and their act is Occidentalism. It is needed that Muslim scholars should focus on this new field of study, so that they can erase the consciously created misconceptions about Islam and the Muslim World by the new orientalism whose intentions are exposed in M. Shahid Alam's book *Challenging the New Orientalism: Dissenting Essays on the 'War against Islam'*. He writes

".....a new Orientalism was also taking shape in the post-war era. It was not based on any strikingly new thesis about Islam. Instead, it was mostly a repackaging of old Orientalism designed to renew a more intrusive dual US-Israeli control over the Middle East. Led by Bernard Lewis, the new Orientalists claim that the Islamicate World is a failed civilization. Among other things, they argue that Islamicate societies have failed to modernize because Islam's mixing of religion and politics makes it incompatible with democracy; Islam does not support equal rights for women and minorities; and Islam commands Muslims to wage war until the whole world is brought under the sway of Islamic law. In short, because of its intransigence and failure to adapt to the challenges of modernity, Islam has become the greatest present threat to civilization, that is, Western interests. (18)

He further writes in his book's first chapter "Bernard Lewis: Scholarship or Sophistry" as

"It would appear from the fulsome praise heaped by mainstream reviewers on Bernard Lewis's most recent and well-timed book, *What went wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, that the demand for Orientalism has reached a new peak. America's search for new enemies that began soon after the end of the Cold War very quickly resurrected the ghost of an old, though now decrepit, enemy, Islamdom. Slowly but surely, this revived the sagging fortunes of Orientalism, so that it speaks again the terrible voice of authority." (19)

It is essential to extend the true picture of Islam to modern world, where the true and just presentation can carve a niche more easily than ever before. And if the facts are presented in logical and convincing manner, they are likely to have an inevitable impression, and in this way the previous imperfect and faulty notions concerning Islam, Islamic culture and civilisation can be erased to have a most transparent and accurate picture of Islam.

Realizing the importance of this field of study, an Institute of Occidental Studies (Institut Kajian Oksidental or Ikon) has been established at University Kebangsaan Malaysia under the directorship of Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, a professor of social anthropology and, currently, the director of The Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation.

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